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ABSTRACT

Westerns Springs College in Auckland, New Zealand is an inner city coeducational secondary school of 670 multicultural and diverse students. Achievement test results in reading comprehension and vocabulary grouped students at the top and bottom of the scale. Reading was identified as a significant barrier to learning and in 1997 staff agreed to begin sustained silent reading (SSR) in conjunction with a peer reading program for those students who needed support. The aim was to establish communities of readers. The program took place in vertical form time with the form tutor--vertical forms are made up of students from year 9 to year 13. Ethnic groups are organized into the same form: Maori, Samoan, Cook Island, Tongan, Nuiean, and Japanese. To find out what students thought about SSR and why a growing number were reluctant readers, a research project was carried out using problem-based methodology developed by Robinson (1993). Selected students were interviewed, and practices, reading behaviors, and constraints were summarized for each student, who was then classified as a reluctant reader or a reader. The readers were focused on the material and clear about their preferences and selections; they were intrinsically motivated. The eight reluctant readers read for less than 10 minutes out of the 20-minute reading session. Reluctant readers focused on the external locus of control. They were not ready to fulfill the model of SSR where the locus of control was on the student--they needed support. (Contains a 12-item bibliography.) (NKA)

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Show Us How: A School-wide Programme for Reluctant Readers

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1999

Sustained silent reading, popular in the late 70s and early 80s, has been making a comeback in New Zealand. The revival has been prompted by concerns about reading standards. Once at the top of international reading league tables, New Zealand slipped to fourth place for 14-year-olds and sixth for 9-year-olds in the reading survey conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of International Achievement in 1990-91 (Caygill, 1993). Worse, there is a worrying and growing disparity between the good and the poorer readers. The same survey showed that New Zealand displayed the widest range in scores for 14 -year- olds than any other country (Wilkinson, 1998).

The IEA literacy survey linked voluntary reading to success in school while also noting that there has been a decline in voluntary reading by New Zealand students because of competing leisure activities. This last finding is supported by Dianne Bardsley's research (1991) which states that an alarming number of students are dependent on school for their time and place of reading.

Western Springs College in Auckland mirrored the results of the IEA survey. It is an inner city , decile 5, coeducational secondary school of 670 pupils. The population is multi-cultural and diverse. Progressive Achievement Test results in reading comprehension and vocabulary grouped students at the top and bottom of the scale (a bimodal distribution). Boys were doing worse than girls, as were students whose home language was not English. Reading was identified as a significant barrier to learning and in 1997 staff agreed to begin sustained silent reading in conjunction with a peer reading programme for those students who needed reading support.

The aim was to establish communities of readers. The programme took place in vertical form time with the form tutor, as it was seen as a cross-curricular initiative. Vertical forms are made up of students from year 9 to year 13. Ethnic groups are organised into the same form: Maori, Samoan, Cook Island, Tongan, Niuean, Samoan and Japanese. Many brothers and sisters choose to be in the same tutor group.

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Sustained silent reading, it was hoped, would be a solution to the problem of the "aliterate reader" described by Bardsley (1991), as the reader who could read but chose not to. It would provide the place and time for students to read and would address the growing gap in academic achievement between the readers and the reluctant readers, identified by Nicholson and Gallienne (1995) as "the Matthew effect".

The theoretical base for SSR has been described by such researchers as Warwick Elley (1996) . We learn to read by reading. Silent reading is a student's main source of new vocabulary, improves comprehension and knowledge about texts. "Sustained silent reading is a structured activity in which students are allocated a fixed period of time for the silent reading of self-selected materials" (Sadowski, 1982). Lymen Hunt (cited Sadowski) described the characteristics of the programme:

- role modelling of reading behaviour by the teacher
- silence
- self-selected material
- no writing about the activity
- emphasis on reading for pleasure

At the end of 1997 the first evaluation of the programme was mixed but generally encouraging. Library statistics showed a significant increase in borrowing. The staff and students were surveyed. The former were overwhelmingly positive about the aims and practice of SSR. Student responses, however, indicated that while many appreciated the restful time after lunch, most did not think SSR was helping their reading. Juniors were more positive than seniors, but year 13 students in particular were resentful about the time devoted to reading.

Early in 1998 teachers complained:

- students were not taking responsibility for bringing material to SSR
- many were unwilling to read
- teachers were spending too much time on management and not enough on modelling

Clearly, there was a lack of cohesion between staff views and student attitudes to SSR.

From an organisational point of view we needed to question whether we were wasting valuable curriculum time. From the reluctant reader's point of view, maintaining SSR time after lunch could be exacerbating negative attitudes towards reading. Was the practice counter-productive? It was important for our school community that we investigated why these students were not reading and either looked for some ways to improve the programme or abandon it..

SSR was dependent on the goodwill and motivation of the students. There were no obvious rewards for students for taking part. There was no assessment regime. This was not a high stakes activity. They were in their vertical form class which had until recently been perceived as an administrative, rather than a learning environment. Once the undermining of the practice arrived at a critical point, we feared we would lose the goodwill and motivation of the teachers, most of whom taught subjects other than English.

We needed to find out what students thought about SSR and why a growing number were reluctant readers during that time. I decided to carry out a research project using problem-based methodology as developed

by Robinson (1993). The advantage of PBM was that it would provide insight into student attitudes. Practice, reading or not reading in SSR, would be analysed as "solutions to practical problems and explained by inquiry into the problem-solving behaviour that gave rise to them."

(Robinson, 1993). Interviews with students would reveal the reasoning giving rise to behaviour in SSR. What was their espoused theory and how did it match up with their practice? What were the constraints operating to prevent a match? The iterative process of interview, analysis, feedback and analysis that is part of this methodology would enable me to take a collaborative approach to the problem and its solution.

Students were selected for interview so that they made up a stratified sample of the school population with regard to age, ethnicity and gender. In all, ten students were selected and another student who heard about the study asked to be included. The sample included two students who had come from other schools and one who had arrived in the country two years ago. They reflected our roll turnover of about 25% per year.

The sample included students who read, students who sometimes read and a student who never read during SSR. This decision was made so that comparisons could be made between readers, those who could and did, and reluctant readers, those who could but did not. Some students interviewed belonged to classes where SSR appeared to function effectively while others came from forms where teachers were having difficulty maintaining the routines.

Practices, reading behaviours and constraints were summarised for each student, who was then classified as a reluctant reader or as a reader. In the feedback sessions students were presented with a summary of their set of constraints (the factors which stopped or encouraged them to read) and then asked to rank them. In accordance with PBM methodology, the constraint sets were revised during this feedback process.

I expected students' lack of commitment to reading to stem from a lack of understanding of the importance of reading. I surmised that students had not been "sold" the concept of SSR sufficiently. This hypothesis was not supported by the data. Only one student was unable to explain what SSR was. Their theories about the school's practice included reasoning about the relationship of reading to learning.

Comments focused on English skills, vocabulary growth, comprehension, pace, reading motivation, writing and even speaking. One memorable comment came from a year 10 student, " It helps you with your academics". SSR's aim of giving students time to read in school because of a perceived lack of time at home was mentioned by two students.

The three students who were readers were identified by the following practices:

- reading for more than ten minutes during SSR
- bringing a book to read
- reading books at home
- distracted by noise
- claimed teacher modelling had no effect

The readers were focused on the material. They were clear about their preferences and confident about being able to select the material they liked. They were adamant that teacher behaviour did not affect theirs.

Two of these students had theories about other students' practice during reading

Teacher : Why do you think we decided to have it?

Student (year 10): To encourage people to read by basically putting them under forced conditions but I don't think that works 'cause people who don't really want to read just don't read.

Student (year 9) : It all really depends on the person. If they don't like reading then you can't really get them to read...you can't make someone read.

All three students demonstrated characteristics of intrinsic motivation as described by Sweet, Ng and Guthrie (1998). They engaged in the activity whether or not it had external value to anyone else, they chose books and read during SSR time, they lost track of time when immersed in the task. They were autonomy-oriented students. They supported Robyn Caygill's analysis of student responses to the 1990-91 IEA survey which found that " students who were good readers thought ... (what) could be considered personal attributes made them a good reader". (1993 p75)

These three intrinsically motivated students showed coherence with their practice, their beliefs and their theories about the school practice.

The eight reluctant readers read for less than 10 minutes out of the 20 minute session. They were:

- unlikely to bring a book to SSR
- dependent on the classroom to provide reading material
- overestimated time spent reading out of school
- were unsure about role modelling by the teacher

Four of the eight students were considered above average readers from their PAT scores, two were average, one was below. Four were female, four were male. These were the students who were the focus of the study. The students for whom SSR was designed, but for whom it was not working.

These students could readily identify what stopped them reading. Their constraints were:

- the reading material was not appropriate
- the classroom environment (noise, lack of comfort, friends)
- they were hot and hyper(active)

The feedback interviews with these students gave me the opportunity to follow up on student responses which indicated that they would appreciate a more active interest from their form teacher. Answering the question, "What could be done to improve SSR? These students said:

Student (year 10) More information about different books

Student (year 11) I'd love to be handed a book...if the teacher actively helped me.

Student (year 9) For me to get a detention if I talked

Student (year 11) I really find it hard to find a novel I enjoy

Reluctant readers focused on the external locus of control. These students were more reliant on school facilities in their analysis. They were not ready to fulfil the model of SSR where the locus of control was on the student. These students were expressing a need for what Sweet, Ng and Guthrie (1998) describe as a sense of "relatedness". Teachers, they maintain, can promote this by:

- caring *I'd have to be given a book*
- enforcing rules *for me to get a detention if I talked*
- demanding maturity (quiet)
- engaging in democratic interaction (discuss books, share books)
- modelling interest in learning (role modelling)

Responses from externally motivated students showed that they needed this support. The social interaction provided by the model, it was hoped, would help to move students toward autonomy.

The reluctant readers were not showing a lack of sympathy for the aims of SSR, nor were they necessarily entirely unenthusiastic about reading. They were displaying what Bardsley (1991) described as "lukewarm dislike" rather than "outright aversion" .

As a result of this research, teachers at Western Springs College adapted the model of SSR. Although the main focus remained on sustained quiet reading, it was also appropriate for time to be set aside for book sharing sessions, for visits to the library so students could have the help they needed to select suitable books, and for book promotions. The revised aim was to know students as readers and to support their entry into a reading community.

The difficulty with this adapted model is that it requires more from the form teachers, many of whom are less confident about the new directions. The school has set up a focus group of students who participated in the research to work with interested teachers to support and evaluate the latest initiatives.

I would like to finish with an extract from the transcript of the interview of one of those students who has helped me enormously with this project:

Reading is a big thing. I think it should be pushed. As much as I dislike it at times it needs to be there for people like me who don't read at all very much at home.

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